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Mr Nick Bennison  
His Majesty's Inspector  
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16<sup>th</sup> February 2024

Dear Mr Bennison

I understand that you were responsible for the OFSTED Inspection of Swindon Borough Council's Children's Services from 17<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> July 2023, and I have been informed that OFSTED are making a follow up inspection on 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> February 2024.

In the interests of full disclosure, GMB are the union for the majority of social workers at Swindon Borough Council (SBC), and we are currently engaged in three separate industrial disputes, involving the i) Emergency Duty Service, ii) Assistant Team Managers, and iii) the IROs, Child Protection Conference Chairs, and LADO. A strike was already scheduled for 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> February before you announced that these were the dates of your visit.

The purpose of this letter is not to promote the industrial dispute, but to raise with you the serious concerns we have about changes to staffing which are, in the opinion of GMB members, undermining the Children's Services Performance Improvement Plan.

In the OFSTED report, you propose that the regularity and effectiveness of management oversight needs to improve. You state that there has been a lack of sufficient oversight, support and challenge at all levels of the local authority.

You also state that the IRO service had not been effective in its role of challenging the quality and timeliness of children's plans. You acknowledged that in July 2023 this was starting to improve.

Unfortunately, the consequences of an ill-considered and botched pay and grading review that took effect on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2023 has undermined progress, and in particular is in danger of reversing the improvements of IRO provision.

Assistant Team Managers have had their status reduced, such that they are in some cases paid less now than Advanced Social Workers. This was despite evidence given by Service Heads to the pay and grading review panel, that in SBC

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the ATMs play an indispensable role in challenge and oversight. Their reduced status has an impact on the effectiveness of their managerial authority.

IROs, LADOs and Child Protection Conference Chairs were effectively demoted: regraded to be two levels below Team Managers. This was despite evidence being given to the Pay and Grading panel of the government guidance in the IRO handbook, that they should be the same status as Team Managers.

This has had two serious impacts, firstly that the authority of their quality assurance and quality control role has been diminished. Instead of being seen as challenge from senior and experienced experts, the perception is that it has been reduced to a peer review. Secondly, the IROs and CP Chairs are contemplating whether there are some roles that they have traditionally undertaken, which they no longer have the authority or status to continue with.

In addition to these problems with ATM, IRO, CP chair and LADO roles, since September significant numbers of senior managers have left the service, taking their collective knowledge with them.

GMB members are apprehensive that when you visit on 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> February, SBC senior managers will seek to ensure that you do not get to speak to the aggrieved staff who will be on strike. While it would be disingenuous of GMB to claim that defence of the service is the only reason that social workers in SBC are on strike, we assure you that the strike is underpinned by the serious concerns of these highly dedicated and professional staff about the quality of SBC's service delivery. Our members fear that changes made since the OFSTED report of July 2023 have worsened rather than improved the quality and robustness of internal processes.

When you and your team visit Swindon, I trust that you will take the opportunity to meet with the striking social workers.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'A' followed by a long horizontal stroke.

Andy Newman  
GMB Branch Secretary  
Three Shires Branch